

Native Plant Spotlight by Krys Kirkwood

Cedars: Trees of Life

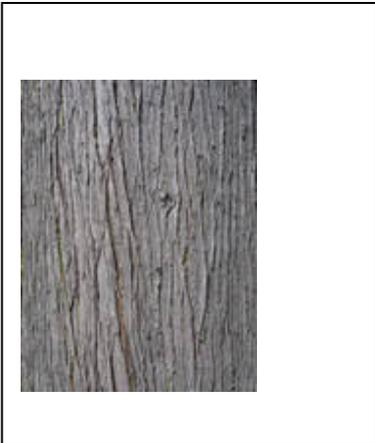
Western red cedar and yellow-cedar were extraordinarily useful trees to the aboriginal peoples of the northern Pacific coastal region, and played key roles in their cultures. From these two cedars, aboriginal people obtained the materials to provide themselves with shelter, clothing, tools and transportation. Cedars provided for these peoples from birth until death, from cradles to coffins.

Thuja plicata – Western Redcedar



This cedar is a large tree up to 60 meters tall, with a drooping leader. Mature trees often have fluted and buttressed bases. The branches tend to spread or droop slightly and then turn upward (J-shaped); branchlets spraylike, strongly flattened horizontally. The bark is gray to reddish brown, tearing off in long fibrous strips; wood is aromatic. The scale-like leaves are pressed close to the stem looking like a flattened braid; glossy yellowish green. Seed cones are egg-shaped, in loose clusters, green when immature, becoming brown, woody and turned upward. You can find western redcedar in moist to wet soils, usually in shaded forests, but also occurs in drier habitats with richer soils; low to medium elevations. Redcedar has been called 'the cornerstone of northwest coast Indian culture'. The easily split, rot-resistant wood was used to make important cultural items such as dugout canoes, house planks and posts, totem and mortuary poles, baskets, clothing, tools, the list goes on and on and on. It was known to be excellent fuel, especially for drying fish, because it burns with little smoke. The bark would be stripped from the tree (as long as 9 meters in length), hung up to dry, then beaten until it separated into layers ready for the making of articles such as baskets, rope or mats. The power of the redcedar tree was said to be so strong a person could receive strength by standing with his or her back to the tree. Redcedar was used for a variety of ailments. Western redcedar is more shade-tolerant than yellow-cedar; it generally out competes where their ranges overlap.

Chamaecyparis nootkatensis – Alaska Yellow Cedar, Yellow-Cyprus, Alaska-Cedar



This tree can achieve a height to 50 meters, but averages 20-40, with and often slightly twisted trunk (buttressed in old trees), the leader droops like a western hemlock. The flattened branches tend to hang vertically and appear limp. The bark is dirty white to grayish-brown in color, in vertical strips similar to that of redcedar but not tearing off in very long strips. The leaves are bluish-green, sharp-pointed, spreading tips. The cones begin as round, bumpy, light-green 'berries' covered with a white waxy powder, ripening to brownish cones. Yellow-cedar can be found in moist to wet sites, often in rocky areas, to timberline; at middle to high elevations. Crushed leaves of the yellow-cedar have an unpleasant, mildewy smell, quite unlike the pleasing odor of redcedar foliage. Another way to distinguish the two species is to stroke the branchlets away from the tip: yellow-cedar is very prickly, redcedar is not. One more way is to expose the inner bark; if it is yellowish and smells like raw potatoes, the tree is yellow-cedar. The tough, straight-grained wood of yellow-cedar was used to make implements by virtually all northwest coast peoples. They made bows, paddles, chests, and dishes. Preparation of yellow-cedar bark was more time-consuming: it had to be soaked and boiled to remove the pitch, and then pounded until it was soft. It was then used for weaving and blankets, where it was preferred to redcedar bark because of its softness. Woven robes, hats and capes made from the fine, soft bark repelled water and protected people from the rain. They used shredded bark as bandages, washcloths and towels. It was also used for various ailments. Yellow-cedar is also the oldest tree in our region, commonly 1,000-1,500 years in age.

Now for the personal touch on this. My parents have 20 acres towards Mt. Baker and I enjoy roaming around their acreage. One day I was out there just doing that. I was with my mom and a couple friends. One friend was commenting on the cedar trees noticing a difference between some. To the house we went to retrieve "the guide book" (Pojar and Mackinnon) and back to trees we went. Here we are trying to decipher whether we found yellow-cedars or not. Yes it is difficult to peel enough bark away so we could stick our noses in to see if it smelled like raw potatoes. But raw potatoes it was after a few tries. My parents have a few nice stands of Alaska yellow-cedar amongst the Western redcedar.

- Photos: Krys Kirkwood
- Reference: Plants of the Pacific Northwest Coast by Pojar and Mackinnon